

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

TIDAL WAVE OF MIGRANT LABORERS IN CHINA**Part I****"94ers: Eastward Ho!"**Shanghai, China
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755
U.S.A.

Dear Peter,

When I stood on the platform in the Fuyang railway station which was crowded with thousands of migrant workers, I was actually witnessing an unfolding profound human drama.

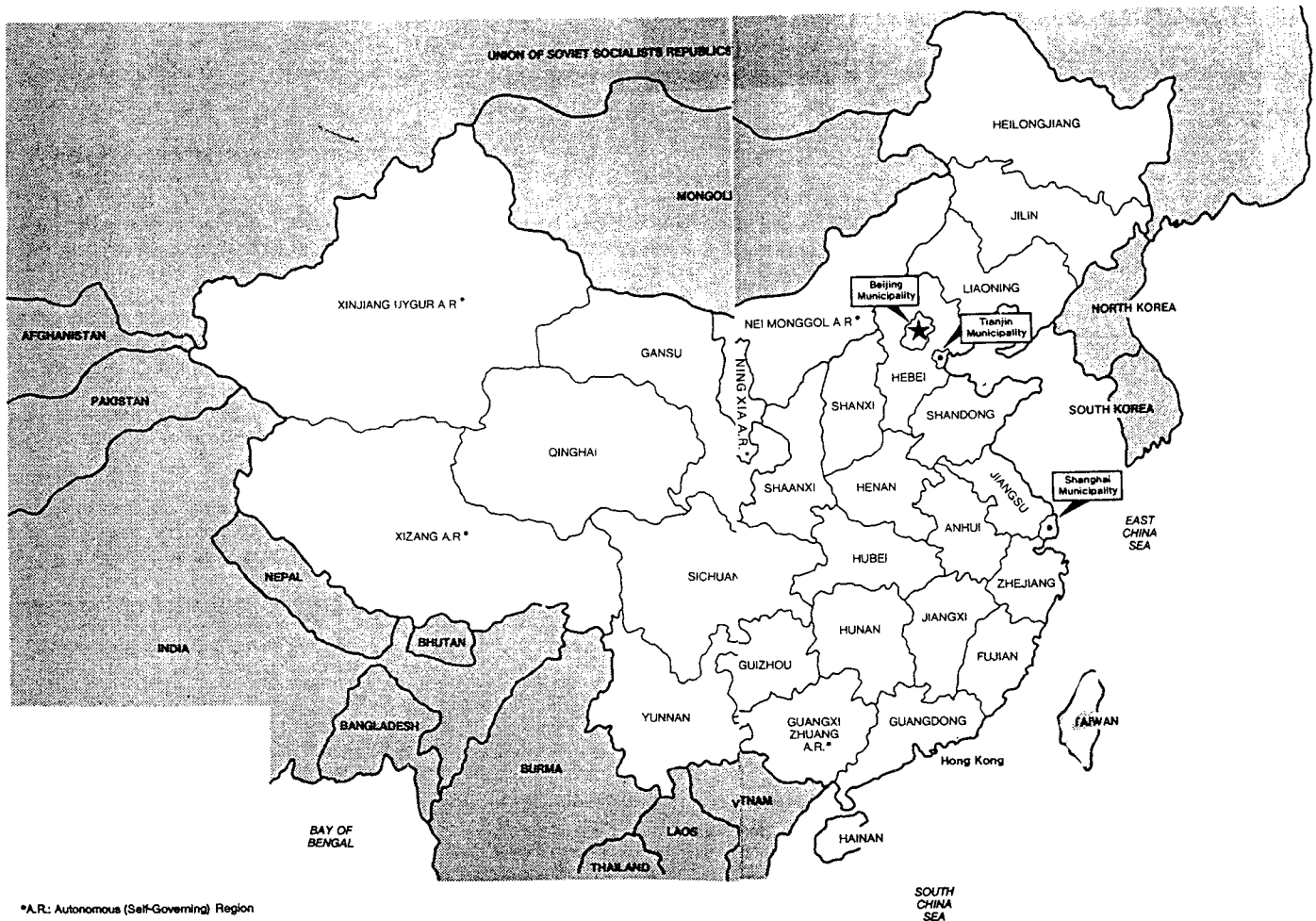
Located 700 kilometers northwest of Shanghai, Fuyang is a populous agricultural region of Anhui, a poor interior province of China. It was recently estimated that this region had three million surplus rural laborers. Many of them left the countryside and went to cities like Shanghai as migrant workers. Virtually every day after the Chinese Spring Festival in February this year, the Fuyang railway station was packed with people who wanted to catch any of the east-bound trains. The station was very small and had a capacity of over a thousand passengers each day. But the day when I was there, about 14,000 tickets were sold. Holding a ticket did not guarantee that one could get on the train. Many of the east-bound trains which stopped in the Fuyang station did not even open the car doors, because the trains were already filled with migrant laborers from elsewhere.

"I have been waiting here for two days, please let me in," a young man begged the passengers inside to open the window so that he could climb on the train.

"No way!" a person on the train responded to his request, "there is absolutely no room inside, you could not find a space to stand, even in the toilet."

Cheng Li is a an ICWA fellow studying the political economy of the coast of China.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.



A tiny toilet on the train, as I was later told by a train conductor, sometimes “accommodated” as many as seven passengers during the rush season on the trains from Anhui to Shanghai.

“Seven people in a train toilet? Incredible!” The toilet in a Chinese train is as small as the ones on Amtrak in the United States. I could not believe what I was told until I saw a newspaper report that a toilet in Train No. 311 from Fuyang to Shanghai once held eight people!

Overloaded trains and huge crowds of people on platforms were, of course, not only seen in the Fuyang station. It was reported that in the railway station of a major city, about 80,000 travelers could not get on a train and they had to stay overnight (Xinmin Evening News, April 21, 1994, p. 12). For those who “luckily” got on the train, it was difficult to bear the miserable conditions. In some extreme cases,

a few passengers jumped out of the window of a moving train and were killed. The Ministry of Railway Transportation investigated 50,000 passengers on five trains and found that 115 passengers suffered mental disorders due mainly to the poor conditions on the train. Most of them (86%) were migrant laborers (Liaowang, No. 36, 1993, p. 18).



Two migrant workers are climbing up to a window of an East-bound train at the Fuyang station in Anhui. During the Spring Festival season this year, many east-bound trains, which were supposed to stop at Fuyang, did not open their car doors because they are already overloaded.

[Photo/Shanghai Railway News]



Migrant laborers flock to Beijing to earn a living. They are queuing up for job opportunities at a labor fair in Chongwen District.

[Photo/China Daily]



Migrant workers are jammed in the waiting area of the Changzhou railway station, waiting for the east-bound trains.

Faced with the “tidal wave of migrant laborers” (*mingongchao* in Chinese), the entire railway system in China was near a shut down in late February this year. According to the Chinese authorities, China’s railway system transported altogether 21 million migrant workers during the Spring Festival season this year. Another 5 million people were transported by buses and ships (People’s Daily, April 18, 1994).

“Twenty-six million people is roughly the population of Canada,” a reporter for China’s official newspaper People’s Daily said to me. “Imagine all the people of Canada being relocated by train within a few weeks!”

“This is one of the largest migrations in human history,” a demographer from the Academy of Social Sciences in Harbin commented. “The scale and impact of China’s current internal migration are surely as great as other major domestic migrations in the world such as the 19th century European Industrial Revolution and the 1849 Gold Rush in the United States.”

Just as “Westward Ho!” became a catchword for American “49ers,” the idea “Go East” has inspired millions of Chinese “94ers” – the term I coined to refer to China’s migrant workers. Chinese migrant laborers have created their own folk rhymes: “Yao

facai, pao

Shanghai” (If you

want to make a

fortune, run to

Shanghai); and

“*Dongxinanbei*

zhong, dagong dao

Pudong” (East,

west, south, north,

center, to find a job

go to Pudong).

Pudong, a new

district of Shanghai

and the largest

special economic

zone in the country,

has become a

“realm of fantasy”

for surplus laborers

in rural China.

About 4,000

construction

projects have been

started in Pudong

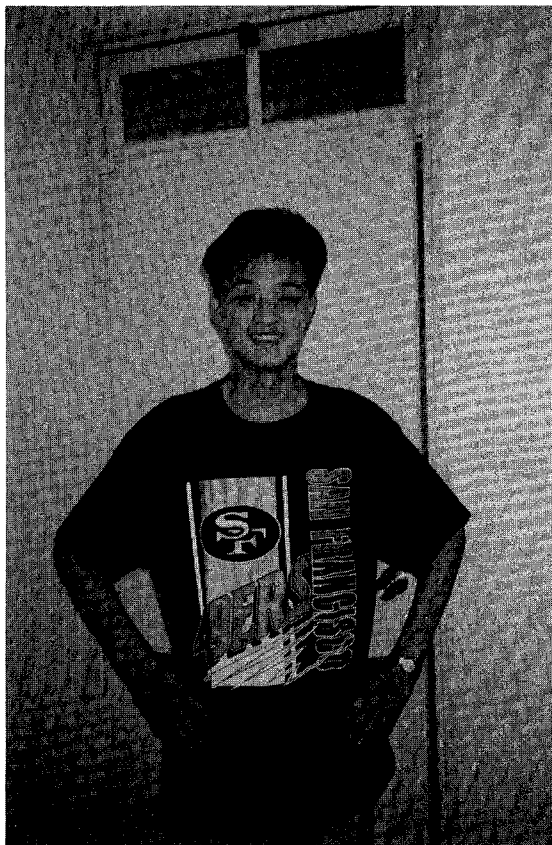
in 1994 and most

construction

workers are

migrants from

other provinces.



A Chinese “94er” dressed as a San Francisco “49er”

Make no mistake, China’s tidal wave of migrant workers did not start in 1994, but was initiated in the early 1980s. Furthermore, surplus laborers in rural China have not only immigrated from west to east in the country, but also from north to south. Guangdong, a southern province, for example, had the largest percentage of migrant laborers in the country until 1990. The number of migrant laborers, however, has increased sharply in the last few years. In Beijing, for example, the floating population increased from 210,000 in 1980 to 1,500,000 in 1992 (Population & Economics, No. 4, 1994, p. 35). According to a recent study, about 10 million people joined “China’s floating population” annually in the first three years of the 1990s (Shehuixue yanjiu, July 1993, p. 65).

As of May 1994 the largest tidal wave of internal migration has already taken place. In some coastal cities, the “floating population” increased 70 per cent this year. Cities and towns on the east coast have attracted more migrant laborers because of rapid economic growth there. Earlier this year, Shanghai’s “floating population” reached 3.3 million, doubling the 1988 figure, according to statistics

compiled by the Shanghai Public Security and Statistic Bureau. This means that there is one newly arrived migrant worker for every three residents in the urban area of Shanghai.



In addition to the railway system which transports millions of migrant laborers to cities on the east coast, long distance buses are also overcrowded by migrant laborers, as this scene in Changzhou bus station demonstrates.

Nearly 75 per cent of the “floating population” are working or doing business in Shanghai. The main force consists of some 760,000 construction workers, 260 per cent more than 1988 (*Shanghai Star*, March 22, 1994, p. 2; and April 15, 1994, p. 1). Other migrant laborers work as waiters, maids, repairmen, furniture makers, factory workers, shop assistants, tailors, street peddlers, packers, haulers, road and lavatory cleaners, garbage collectors and mortuary attendants. Most migrant workers in

Shanghai are in their late teens or early 20s. About 80 per cent have primary or middle school education. Fully three-quarters are unmarried. About 70 per cent are male. (Zhongguo renkou nianjian, 1990, p. 553; and Shehuixue yanjiu, July 1993, p. 68). They mainly come from rural areas of Anhui, Henan, Jiangxi, Sichuan, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu provinces.

For Americans, moving from one state to the other is a quite common phenomenon. The annual cross-state moving rate in the U.S. is 4 per cent. But in China, the annual cross-province moving rate was as low as 0.12 per cent in the 1980s (Population and Economy, No. 3, 1992, p. 13). Two major reasons constitute the difference. First, China is traditionally not a mobile nation. Only war or natural disaster could persuade Chinese peasants to leave their beloved farm land.



A group of teenage girls from Guizhou province are selling trinkets in the Shanghai railway station. Each of them earn only 10 yuan (\$1.2 US) per day. Still, this is double their wages at home.

Secondly, contemporary Chinese authorities have always controlled internal migration. The term “floating population,” according to a Chinese scholar, is uniquely Chinese. Citizens in democratic countries are free to move from one region to the other (Shehui, August, 1993, p. 39). The Chinese Communist government adopted a household registration system soon after it came to power in 1949. Each family in an urban area had a household registration book (*hukoubu*). A copy was kept on file at the local police station. *Hukoubu* indicated legal permission for a family to live in an urban area. The family also needed this household registration book to receive certificates for grain, cotton, cooking oil, milk, sugar, meat, and other necessities.

But during the post-Mao era, the ration system dissolved because all products could easily be bought at slightly higher prices on free markets. Although the household

registration system remains, it has lost its effectiveness as a means of controlling where people live. Rapid urban economic growth pulled more laborers from rural areas to join workforces in construction, commerce, and civil service in Chinese cities. In addition, permanent city residents became increasingly unwilling to do “dirty jobs” as such lavatory cleaners or garbage collectors.

According to a recent investigation, migrant laborers have shouldered 80 per cent of the “dirty, heavy, and dangerous jobs” in Shanghai

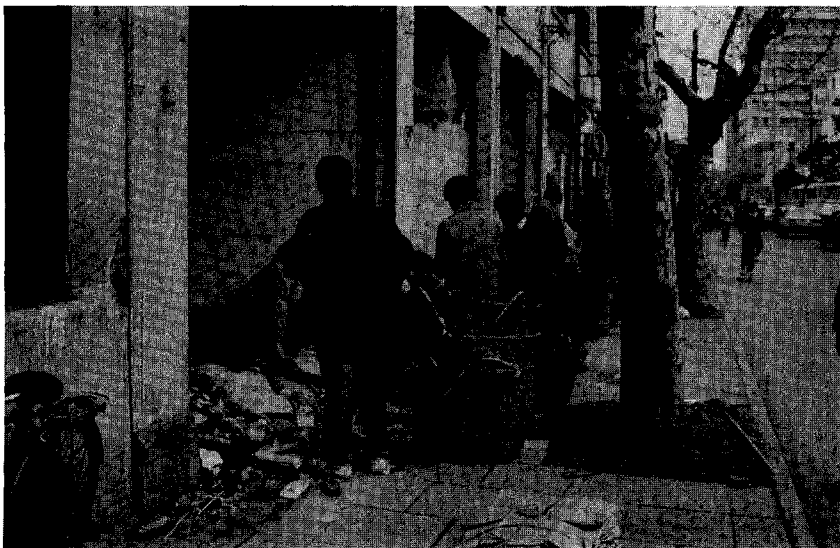
(*Zhongguo shibao zhoukan*, Jan. 16-22, 1994, p. 65).



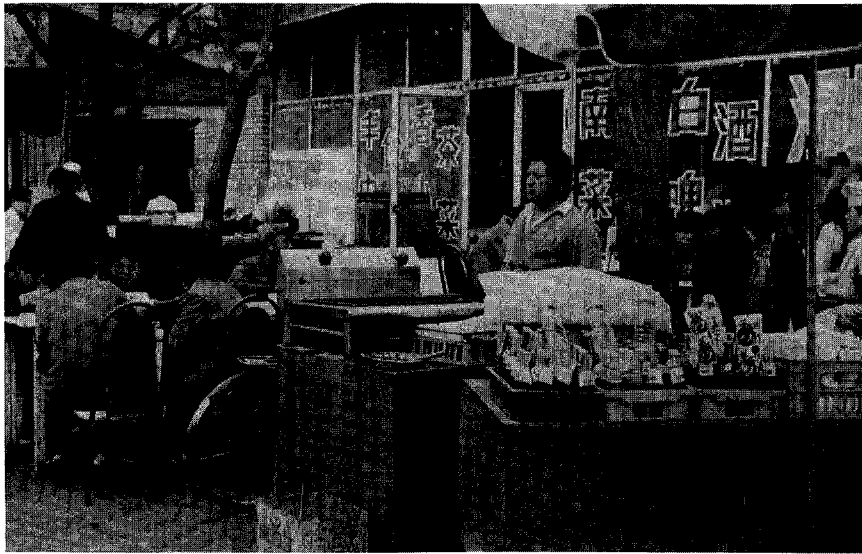
Li Yusheng, 23, from Wuwei, a poor county in Anhui province. Both she and her sister work in Shanghai as maids. Wuwei county, as Li told me, exports soldiers in wartime, maids in peacetime.



Sichuan food became popular in China's coastal cities such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Beijing during the last two years when a hundred of Sichuan restaurants were opened there. Most of these restaurants hired people from Sichuan as cooks and waiters. Some of these "Sichuan sisters" working in a restaurant of Beijing earn only 150 yuan (\$17 US) a month.



Migrant laborers have shouldered 80 per cent of the "dirty, heavy, and dangerous jobs" in Shanghai. This group of garbage collectors in Shanghai is from Hunan and all of them are just teenagers.



Some Muslims from Xinjiang sell barbequed lamb on a Beijing Street.

Meanwhile, surplus agricultural workers and the shortage of arable land in China have become increasingly acute. China accounts for 20 per cent of the world's population, but has only 7 per cent of the world's arable land. Only about a quarter of China's vast territory is arable. Rural economic reform and the increasing use of modern agricultural technology in the 1980s also contributed to the increase in surplus laborers in the countryside. According to a report recently released by the Project Team of Labor Transfer in Chinese Agriculture, China has more than 100 million surplus peasants. Although some of them will be absorbed by rural industries, a larger portion will add to the floating population in the cities (Jinjilun yu jinjiguanli, No. 1, 1992, p. 9).

"We used to spend three month doing farm work, one month celebrating the Spring Festival, and eight months idle time every year," explained Wang Haitao, a 25-year-old migrant laborer from Henan province, whom I met in a restaurant in Suchou. Mr. Wang worked as a waiter and earned 400 yuan (\$47 US) a month. Although working 14 hours a day, seven days a week, he seemed to be happy with his current situation.

"This is four times more than my monthly salary as a peasant in Henan," he said.

"Do you feel that you work too many hours?" I asked.

"No, it is better than sitting idly by watching people in cities getting rich," he answered.

"The conditions here are not bad at all. Color TV, electric heating, free meals – these are great," Wang continued. "What I like most here is that I can take a shower everyday! I was not able to take a bath during the entire winter at home. It would be too cold to do so in the river."

"Is the owner of the restaurant nice to you?"

"Sure," he gave me an example. "Last month my younger brother came to Suchou to look for a job. My boss gave me two days off so that I could show him

around the city. Actually my brother ended up working in this restaurant as a dishwasher."

Compared with the conditions of many other migrant workers, Mr. Wang's experience is probably not bad indeed. Not being permanent residents of the place in which they work, migrant laborers have less protection against injustice and exploitation. They are often treated as though they have only minimum maintenance needs, rather than as individuals with a wide range of human needs and rights.

Dorothy Solinger, an American scholar on Chinese politics, has observed that Chinese migrant workers, like immigrant laborers elsewhere, "are eager to earn money at any price, grateful for the chance to live in the city, vulnerable to threats of deportation, subject to enormous competition, and powerless because of the state's unwillingness to offer them rights, welfare, or security" (*Politics & Society*, Vol. 21, No. 1, March 1993, pp. 97-98).

"No medical care, no health insurance, no work contracts, no trade union, no welfare benefits, no permanent residence permits, no workplace safety, we have virtually nothing but a little bit of money," a migrant laborer whom I met on the train during the Spring Festival season this year said to me. He was originally from Liaoning and was heading to Xuzhou, Jiangsu province, where he worked in a railway station as a porter.

"My back was injured while I was moving a heavy box two weeks ago. But I couldn't ask for sick leave. If I did, I would lose my job for sure," the porter continued. "Fortunately, I could go home for my Spring Festival vacation three days after I hurt my back. Now I guess I can manage heavy work."

The bitterness of that porter is widely shared by other migrant workers. A Chinese researcher interviewed 610 migrant workers in Beijing and found that 60 per cent of them felt that they had been discriminated against by employers, government officials, or local residents (*Zhongguo laodong bao*, Oct. 30, 1993, p. 3).

In Shenzhen, China's first special economic zone, many joint ventures or private firms violated labor regulations. Although the municipal government enacted a minimum wage, some firms still paid workers less than the minimum. Some workers were paid only 5.5 yuan (\$0.6 US) per day. Furthermore, some owners in Shenzhen required contract workers to sign contract stating that they would waive any compensation if an accident occurred. Workers called the contract "*maishenqi*" – indenture to the factory. (*Baokan wenzhai*, Feb. 3, 94, p. 1).

Legally established workplace safety regulations are usually neglected by employers of migrant workers. One of the worst violation of workplace safety happened in Shenzhen on November 19, 1993, when 81 workers in a toy factory died in a fire. Among them were 79 young women and all of them were from other areas. They couldn't escape because the owners had sealed the windows and locked the gate of the workshop to "prevent theft." (*Zhongguo xinxi bao*, Jan. 21, 1994, p. 3; and *Jiefang Daily*, Nov. 21, 1993, p. 5).

In addition to enduring abusive, substandard working conditions, migrant workers often have extremely poor living environments. Migrant workers to metropolises usually find it difficult to obtain living space in the overcrowded central city. They therefore rent or build slum-dwellings in satellite towns or the outskirts of

big cities. They usually form their own community of the people from the same province. “Anhui village,” “Sichuan village,” “Hunan village” have emerged in China’s metropolitan cities.

In Beijing, about ten thousand migrant workers from Zhejiang have settled in Fengtai’s Dahongmen district. The “Henan village” of several thousand migrant workers is in Haidian’s Erlizhuang district. Local residents in Beijing dub these new neighborhoods “Trash Villages.” Some of the villages are indeed surrounded by garbage. In a village near the Fourth Ring Road in Beijing, there is only one toilet for over six thousand people. The sanitary conditions there are extremely bad.



Two migrant workers sleep on a street in Shanghai.

Not many Shanghaiese nowadays are interested in visiting Pengpu district, but for a reporter investigating the lives of migrant laborers it is a compelling destination. Before I went, I had heard it described as a “newly established slum” and one of the largest communities for migrant workers in Shanghai.

I visited the Pengpu district on a sunny but windy day in late March this year. At first I simply could not find the settlement for migrant laborers. The residential quarter of Pengpu district was old, but no one in Shanghai would call it a slum. It would still be a dream, as much as thirty years ago when the district was built, for houseless newly-weds to have a room there. In recent years, several new apartment buildings were added to the residential quarter.

“Where do migrant workers live in this neighborhood?” I asked a girl who was selling eggs on the street.

"Over there," the girl pointed to a place about two hundred meters away. "See that line of shacks in front of the new tall building?"

I had thought these were the temporary storage shelters for the construction team, and never imagined that these tiny houses could be homes.

"Would you like to take a look?" a young man who had just bought eggs from the salesgirl was very friendly. He was willing to show me the shack in which he lived.

"Yes, of course." I was really grateful for his offer.

"May I know your name?" I asked

"Liu Lin" He answered.

Aged 19, Mr. Liu came from Sichuan province. He arrived in Shanghai at the beginning of this year, working for a construction company as a bricklayer.

"How much do you earn every month?" I asked on our way to the shack.

"It depends on how much work is available," he responded. He told me that he earned 1,000 yuan (\$120 US) in the first month in Shanghai, 600 yuan in the second month, and expected to receive 1,200 yuan in March.

"Do you send money back home?"

"Yes, I spent 200 yuan per month here and sent the rest to my mother at home."

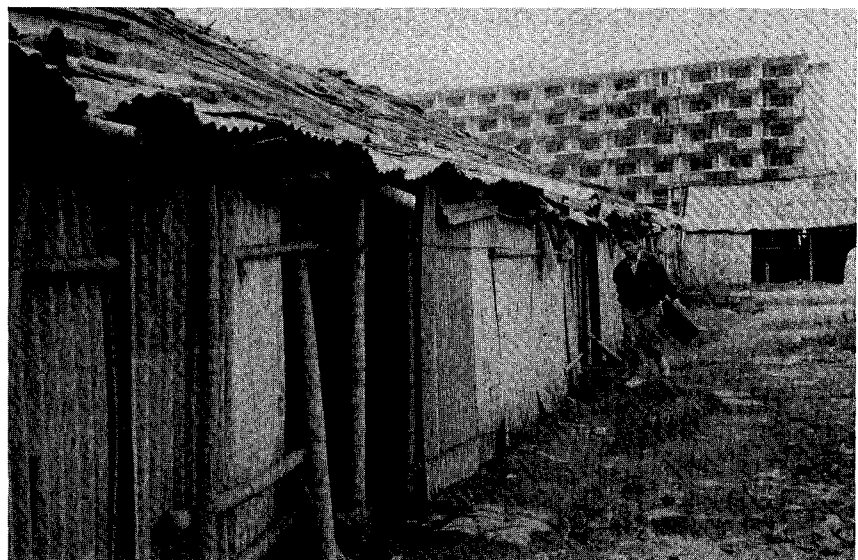
"Your mother will put the money in the bank so that you can use it when you get married, am I right?"

Liu Lin's face blushed with shyness. "I'm too young to think about marriage," Liu explained. "My parents' house in Sichuan is too old and we need to save money to repair it."

"Are you happy with your life here in Shanghai?" I asked.

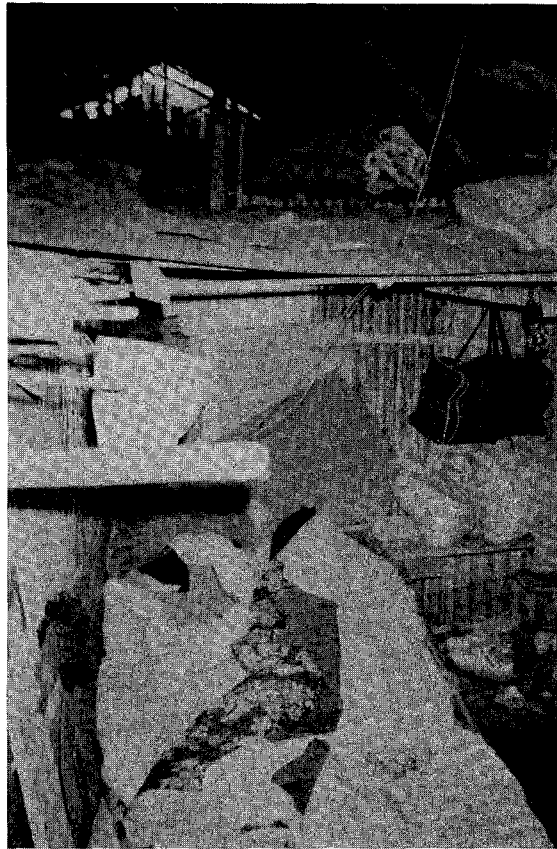
"It's fine, although you may think that our living conditions are not so good, as you will see."

Liu gives me a stool so that I can stand on it to look at the entire shack from above.



Walking along a bumpy, narrow passageway, we arrived at the line of shacks where Liu Lin and his fellow workers lived. The shacks were built with fired-brick walls, soil-stone floors and asphalt roofs. Actually there was only one large shack, which was separated into smaller “rooms” by card board and bamboo plates.

Liu told me that over five hundred people lived in this 300-square-metre shack. It was difficult to believe that shack could hold so many people. Liu brought a stool so that I could see the entire shack from above. This very low shack actually had two “floors” – some residents added hanging boards under the roof for sleeping.



An inside view of the “two-floor” shack in Pengpu District of Shanghai

Liu also showed me a six-square-metre “room” where 18 migrant workers lived. “We are so tired after work each day that we only need a space to lie down,” Mr. Chen, 23, also from Sichuan, explained to me when I asked him how 18 adults could manage to live in this tiny room.

There was virtually nothing in the shack except the bedding. Some asphalt roofs had already been blown off by the heavy wind. The bedding was moist because late March is the rainy season in Shanghai. Apparently, this shack could not provide shelter from wind or rain.

“People will get rheumatism if they have moist bedding,” I said to Liu.

“Yes, I know,” Liu pointed to the bedding hanging outside the shack, “we are drying them in the sun.”

“But if the rain lasts for weeks ...”

“We are not really concerned about too many things,” Liu interrupted me.

“I do not complain about my situation here. The rent is low,” Liu explained. “More importantly, I like to stay with my fellow Sichuan people. We take care of each other like brothers. We shoulder our hardship together, just as we share our dreams.”

Liu told me that he had to go back to work. I thought I should pay him for the time he had spent showing me around. But I needed to do so in a respectful way.

"Do you smoke?" I asked.

"Yes."

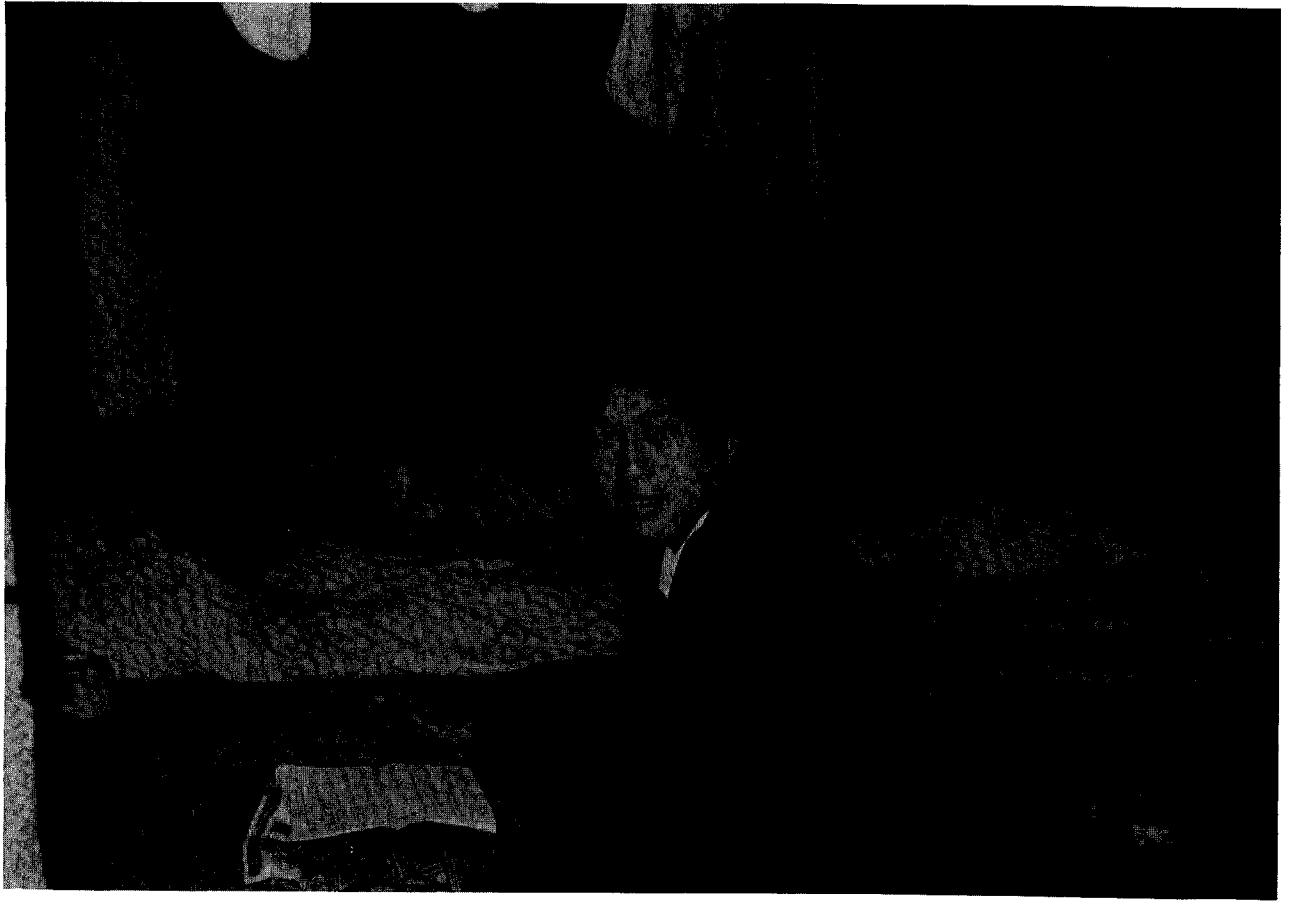
"May I buy you several boxes of cigarettes?"

"No, you don't need to. You may just give me a cigarette now," he said.

"I'm sorry I don't smoke. But I can buy some nearby."

"No, don't worry about it."

Mr. Liu said "good bye" to me and left. I took a taxi back to downtown Shanghai.



Mr. Chen, 23, from Sichuan province, is writing a letter to his parents at home while fellow Sichuanese are sleeping. Altogether 18 people live in this six-square-meter room!

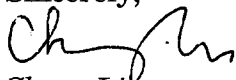
I really enjoyed meeting this 19-year-old young man. He was simple and honest, but at the same time also mature and sophisticated for his age. He did not have any sensational stories to tell, instead he actually told me a lot about the lives of migrant workers in Shanghai – their happiness and bitterness, their hardships and dreams. These are probably the common experience and aspiration of many other migrant workers in China. Unlike the 49ers in the United States, China's 94ers do not necessarily want to be "people of wealth." They are simply looking for a better life, an alternate way of life, a life beyond the countryside.



An outside view of the shack in the Pengpu District of Shanghai. About five hundred people live in this three hundred-square meter shack. Behind the shack is a new apartment complex for city-dwellers.

Migrant workers have already become a distinctive group in China during the 1990s. They are an important socio-economic force which has contributed to the economic development of the country. But they are still largely treated as what a Chinese official has called a “community outside the system” (*tizhiwaiqunluo*). Like the 49ers, Chinese migrant workers are faced with many hardships. One of the biggest challenges for China in the years to come is how to integrate migrant workers into all aspects of urban life and to provide all the social welfare benefits that they deserve. The issue concerning migrant workers, as my next newsletter will show, is one that China cannot afford to deliberate upon for too long.

Sincerely,


Cheng Li

No. 5, Lane 570
Chang Le Road
Shanghai, 200040, China
Fax No.: 86-21-2474947

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